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Lady Macbeth Now and Then

When analyzing literature’s characters, who comes to mind as the ultimate villain? Better yet, who comes to mind as an evil woman, especially in patriarch times? Lady Macbeth is easily one of the greatest female antagonists of all time due to her ability to control her husband’s actions. Part of her villainous nature is that she was created in a time where most females in literature did not have much of an impact on decision making – most literary works were very patriarchal. In the majority of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth was malicious and controlling in her deeds without feeling a shred of guilt, but toward the last breaths she took, she was overfilled with guilt, turning into the paranoid person she had threatened her husband not to be.

While taking the roll of the dominant spouse, Lady Macbeth was originally pushing Macbeth to erase his guilt and cowardice, but eventually was suffocated by her guilt from the acts they committed. Her malice grew thicker as she spoke to the spirits saying, “Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell” (1.5.57-58). In this quote, she was asking the spirits to allow her to feel no guilt in the crimes that her and Macbeth were about to commit. Despite her desire to remain guiltless, she cried, “Hell is murky” when sleep walking near the end of her life as if she had been to hell herself (5.1.38). In her first quote, Lady Macbeth was challenging the forces of hell to swallow up her sense of morals, which symbolized her evil nature, but her second quote revealed a sense of figurative cowardice. The second quote revealed that she accepted defeat and knew where she was heading after her death. Shakespeare had her appear as a dominant character, almost masculine in her sense of power, to show that desire sought by going against one’s morals can be destructive. Lady Macbeth’s power-hungry nature caused Macbeth to go against his highest morals, and she did not care if he was consumed by guilt or not. Their roles flipped in the end when she was ill with guilt and Macbeth no longer felt guilty. Had Lady Macbeth not have said the second quote, the theme would not have been as clear because her guilt would not have been her downfall. Because she was guilt free and then overflowing with guilt by the end of the play, Shakespeare showed Lady Macbeth’s transformation from a dominant female character that went against the “everyday female in literature” to the expected feeble female character to exhibit how contradicting one’s conscience can lead to someone’s downfall.

As Lady Macbeth went from being powerful to powerless, she also transformed in what she made of her husband’s image. Early on in the play, she questioned his manhood in order to get what she wanted – ultimate power. She said, “What, quite unmanned in folly?...Fie, for shame!” to make Macbeth give in to killing Duncan (3.4.88, 90). Figuratively, this quote revealed her status of power in the play. It meant that she was not going to be a coward, and neither should he. Later on during her sleep walking, she envisioned herself asking Macbeth, “Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeared?” (5.1.38-39). She was asking if someone can be brave yet afraid, but figuratively it revealed her inner cowardice escaping along with her guilt. Soldiers are supposed to show no fear, as Lady Macbeth originally did, but her guilt became so pent up that she was overpowered by it. If Lady Macbeth had not admitted that she was afraid, the theme that desire often overpowers morals and leads to one’s downfall would not have been clear. Shakespeare had Lady Macbeth question Macbeth’s manhood so the theme would be clear; Lady Macbeth would stop at nothing to make sure her husband, and more importantly, herself, were put on the throne. Lady Macbeth’s transformation from a dominant woman to a fearful woman was shown by Shakespeare to exhibit the downfall of a character after opposing their morals to achieve power.

When the murder of Duncan was committed, Lady Macbeth was fearless, but after, she transformed by growing weary. Soon after Macbeth returned mentally-paralyzed from his dastardly deed, Lady Macbeth exclaimed, “Give me those daggers. The sleeping and the dead Are but as pictures…If he do bleed, I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal…” (2.2.69-70, 71-72). She was prepared to take matters into her own hands when her husband lacked courage and her stone cold heart, which figuratively represented her villainous, evil persona. Later, however, ambitious Lady Macbeth’s personality changed completely; she became afraid of the consequences of the killing of Duncan. She said, “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” when sleep talking, which revealed her new guilt approaching. This figuratively represented her contrition – a transformation from a woman of power to a woman of frailty. What if Lady Macbeth would not have made this transformation? Her and her husband may not have ended up dying; there may have been a different ending to the play. The destruction that occurred as consequences of their actions would not have shown what Shakespeare intended: immoral seeking of one’s desires can cause much devastation. The change of Lady Macbeth from a figurehead for power to a guilt filled woman resulted in consequences that revealed that desires can often lead to power-hungry people’s downfall.

When a character such as Lady Macbeth transforms in literature, there is always a reason, and this reason was to show how one’s world can be turned upside down if something is gained by immoral ways; one of them in particular was her ability to forget her misdoings after they killed Duncan. When Macbeth felt as though he could not forget the murder, she said, “A little water clears us of this deed. How easy is it, then!” (2.2.86-87). She felt no remorse for murdering Duncan; she would gladly do it again if it meant gaining the throne. Once again, this quote symbolized her malevolence. While this quote revealed her true inner villain, later she said, “What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” (5.1.45). This quote was during her sleepwalking, and she was talking about all of the blood that had been spilled over their ambitious goal to take the throne. She feared that she would never be guilt-ridden, and this quote figuratively represented the guilt growing inside her. Shakespeare wanted the audience to know that gaining desires through selfish and immoral ways will not get anyone anywhere in life, and if Lady Macbeth had not transformed from a powerful, egotistical woman into a frail coward, this theme would not have been as clear. Because she changed from powerful to powerless based upon her actions, the theme that desire sought by the wrong means can often lead to poor consequences for someone was conveyed.

Despite her initial diabolical state, Lady Macbeth transformed completely into a seemingly spineless woman, showing that obtaining ambitious goals through unnecessary means can change someone completely, leading to their downfall. Lady Macbeth is the perfect example for this theme that Shakespeare wanted the audience to grasp; she was once very powerful, but then lost everything once guilt got to her. There are more instances where she transformed into exactly what she harassed Macbeth not to become – a coward. Throughout the entire play, this inner coward may have been present in Lady Macbeth; it just took the buildup of guilt to cause her life to go downhill. By going from her dominant self to feeling culpable after the guilt caught up with her from the innocent blood that was shed, Lady Macbeth portrayed the theme that acquiring one’s intentions through non-virtuous ways can lead to someone’s defeat.